

NEW AGE RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION¹

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

Some years ago a considerable stir was caused in the Dutch popular media by a novel which had climbed the bestseller lists with almost unprecedented speed and then stubbornly refused to vanish from the number one position. The book was written by an American, James Redfield, and had a catchy title: *The Celestine Prophecy*. Following its phenomenal success, an accompanying *Celestine Workbook* quickly appeared; and by the time everybody knew that the *Celestine Prophecy* was about the revelation of “nine spiritual insights,” the time was deemed ripe for a follow-up entitled *The Tenth Insight*, quickly followed by its own workbook. The end is not yet in sight: at the time of writing those who thirst for more may profit from yet a third volume in the series, *The Celestine Vision*, again with its own workbook. Even though these later volumes have not attained the same sales as the first, they must still be considered highly successful books, as attested by their prolonged presence on the Dutch bestseller lists. The “celestine phenomenon” is an international one — on the World Wide Web the nine insights are the subject of enthusiastic discussion, Redfield’s books have spawned a whole range of secondary products (books of aphorisms, videotapes, and so on), and the lessons of the workbooks

¹ This is a revised English translation of a text that has been published in Dutch, as *Christelijke Spiritualiteit en New Age: Over de rol van “Celestijnse Beloftes” in een seculiere samenleving* (Utrechtse Theologische Reeks 36), Utrecht 1997. The research was supported by the Foundation for Research in the Field of Philosophy and Theology in the Netherlands, which is subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Research (NWO).

are now being put into practice in the context of numerous courses for spiritual development.²

Let me begin this article with two statements. Firstly, *The Celestine Prophecy* is an extremely significant book which should be on the reading list of anybody who wishes to understand what is happening to religion in contemporary western societies. Secondly, this does not detract from the fact that *The Celestine Prophecy* is an appallingly shallow piece of writing, produced by an author without an ounce of literary talent and whose "insights" evince a remarkable lack of profundity or originality. I cannot recall ever having encountered a book of worse quality during more than five years of studying New Age literature.³

It will be obvious, therefore, that if I consider *The Celestine Prophecy* such an important book it is not because of its qualitative merits but in spite of their absence. Bestsellers of this kind are significant because they function as a sort of thermometer for what is happening to religion in our society. As such, *The Celestine Prophecy* has succeeded in bringing many observers to an unexpected, even revelatory, insight (but one which will not be found among the nine discussed in the book): "New Age spirituality" is no longer a phenomenon limited to a comparatively marginal subculture, but has developed into a type of broad folk religion which appeals to many people at all levels of society. To many observers this has come as an unpleasant surprise. Literary critics and journalists were mystified and shocked by the suggestion that precisely this kind of *Trivalliteratur* encapsulates the sentiments of the spiritually interested populace. But while such reactions are understandable enough, there is no reason to infer that everybody who has experienced the *Celestine Prophecy* as an inspiring

² The three main titles are: James Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure*, London 1995; id., *The Tenth Insight: Holding the Vision. Further Adventures of the Celestine Prophecy*, Toronto 1996; id., *The Celestine Vision: Living the New Spiritual Awareness*, New York, 1997.

³ For the results of my analysis of popular New Age literature, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden/New York/Köln 1996 [U.S. edition: Albany 1998].

book is therefore devoid of any critical judgment. Many readers appear to realize very well that the book is not exactly an impressive feat of literary skill, but this simply does not seem to be a matter of concern to them. They are not looking for an exciting story or for literary subtlety. From talks with enthusiastic readers, I have concluded that what seems to impress them is a feeling of recognition, of being understood. Redfield writes things which seem to resonate with their own experience, and his book provides them with a welcome occasion and a point of reference for talking about it. As I will argue, this experience is essentially one of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of contemporary culture and society.

In my opinion, the success of *The Celestine Prophecy* demonstrates that New Age thinking has taken root in contemporary western society to a much greater extent than most observers would like to believe. That precisely this book has attained such phenomenal popularity may be explained by its very simplicity. Its commercial surplus value lies in the fact that it can reach not only the better educated, but also those who rarely ever read books and for whom most of the standard New Age literature already tends to be quite difficult. Apparently — and contrary to what has sometimes been suggested — there appears to be a market for New Age among this less educated sector of the populace as well: it merely needs to be approached on its own intellectual level in order to be mobilized.⁴

Why is it that New Age spirituality has such a broad appeal in contemporary western society? Let me first give a very brief sketch of what I mean by “New Age”.⁵

⁴ Sociological research suggests that New Age thinking appeals mainly to representatives of the better-educated middle classes. As far as I know, the question of whether this is because the less-educated are less interested in New Age spirituality, or because a latent interest is not being capitalized upon, has seldom been posed. The success of *The Celestine Prophecy* points towards the latter explanation. For those whose literature does not go beyond the level of popular doctor novels, most of the standard literature in New Age bookshops will not have much appeal.

⁵ For an extensive discussion I refer to my *New Age Religion*. A somewhat more complete summary version than provided here may be found in my article “The New

1. New Age

New Age thinking in general is characterized by a pervasive pattern of implicit or explicit culture criticism. Within a New Age context one may encounter a very wide variety of ideas and convictions, but underneath there is a general dissatisfaction with certain aspects of western thought such as one may encounter in contemporary culture. Those who are attracted by New Age thinking do not necessarily have very explicit ideas about the coming of a “new era,” but they all agree that our society could and should be different. I suggest that it is this (often latent and half-conscious) experience of dissatisfaction with existing daily realities, a feeling that mainstream culture leaves no room for certain important dimensions of personal human experience, which is activated and “given a voice” by a book such as *The Celestine Prophecy*. An analysis of representative New Age sources makes it possible to formulate this New Age culture criticism in technical terms. Firstly, all New Agers object to *dualism* in its various forms: therapeutic (i.e., assuming a sharp separation between body and spirit, as well as between healing and spiritual development), religious (i.e., opposing God as Creator against created beings), ecological (i.e., opposing man against nature), and so on. Such various forms of dualism should be replaced by “holistic” alternatives: God and man are one in their deepest essence, therapies must treat “the whole person” and the healing process is a process of spiritual development at one and the same time, humanity must rediscover its lost connection with nature, and so on. In addition, New Age thinking is generally opposed to *reductionism* in its various forms: the universe does not resemble a dead mechanism but a living organism permeated by a spiritual force,

Age Movement and the Esoteric Tradition,” in: Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, Albany 1998, 359-382; I go beyond the discussions in my book in my articles “New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian’s Perspective,” *Social Compass* 46: 2 (1999) and “The New Age Movement,” in: Linda Woodhead (ed.), *Religion in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, London 2000.

and the dimension of the spiritual itself cannot be reduced to purely material processes.

A very similar pattern of culture criticism may also be encountered elsewhere, for example in certain environmental and feminist movements. What sets New Age apart is that its primary sources of inspiration for formulating holistic alternatives are derived from certain so-called “western esoteric” traditions which have long existed in our culture but have seldom been dominant. New Agers usually ascribe dualist and reductionist tendencies in western culture to the influence of a dogmatic, institutionalized Christianity on the one hand, and an over-rationalist science on the other. But apart from these two, they assume the existence of a third current, which has usually been marginalized and suppressed by the other two. This third current is referred to by various terms, such as “esotericism” or “gnosis”. In the former instance, the idea is that an inner core of true spirituality lies hidden behind the outer surface of all religious traditions, and that the knowledge of it has been kept alive by secret traditions throughout the ages.⁶ In the latter instance, New Agers do not primarily mean the largely dualist metaphysical systems known as gnosticism, but a supposedly universal spirituality based upon the primacy of personal inner experience.⁷

⁶ This combines two common meanings of western esotericism, as distinct from a third one used as a technical term in academic discussion. See Antoine Faivre, “Questions of Terminology Proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe,” in: Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion: Selected Papers Presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City 1995* (Gnostica: Texts & Interpretations 2), Louvain 1998; and cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Some Remarks on the Study of Western Esotericism,” *Theosophical History* (1998) March 1999, 223-232 [tevens: *Esoterica* 1:1 <www.esoteric.msu.edu>].

⁷ Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions,’” in: Faivre and Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*.

New Agers themselves tend to present a highly biased and factually misleading picture of these traditions⁸ but from a historical point of view it is true that the New Age movement has indeed emerged from what may be referred to as “esoteric” currents in western culture. While New Agers tend to be especially fascinated by the gnostic currents in early Christianity, the historical roots of the New Age movement actually have a more recent origin. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the New Age movement can be regarded as a contemporary manifestation and transformation of western esoteric currents and traditions which originated in the early Renaissance.⁹ It is therefore important to emphasize that when I use the term “esotericism” in the rest of this article, I am *never* using it in the popular sense of the word (where it tends to be used as a near synonym of “New Age”) but, rather, in the technical academic sense, referring to a cluster of specific historical traditions which become clearly perceptible in connection with the revival of hermeticism in the late 15th century.¹⁰

According to this usage, the term “western esotericism” covers a complicated mixture of currents which in their original form are an integral part of the history of Christianity, and which flourished between the late 15th and the end of the 18th centuries. Like the more dominant currents of Christianity, western esoteric currents have taken on radically new forms under the impact of processes of secularization since the period of the Enlightenment, and this is an important point to emphasize. One frequently encounters the assumption that modern manifestations of western esotericism cannot be so very different from their predecessors in earlier centuries. According to critical outsiders,

⁸ Here I foreshadow the chapter on emic and etic esoteric historiographies in the important monograph by Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, forthcoming in Brill’s series “Studies in the History of Religions” (Numen Book Series).

⁹ For an overview of western esoteric traditions, see Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany 1994.

¹⁰ For a technical definition of western esotericism, see Faivre, *Access*, 10-15; and for a criticism, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 396-403.

this is because irrationalism and “magical” or “occult” superstition are universal human temptations present in all periods and cultures. According to modern esotericists, it is because the esoteric is a universal spiritual presence, the essential reality of which remains unaffected by cultural contingencies. Against these assumptions of universality, I believe it to be undeniable that the 19th century produced radically innovative mixtures of traditional esoteric and modern rationalist and scientific ideas. The result was a *new* phenomenon, which is best referred to as “occultism”. Occultism may therefore be defined as secularized esotericism. It is this 19th-century phenomenon, and not some supposed universal gnosis, which forms the historical foundation of New Age.

The above will suffice as a summary of what I mean by “New Age”. It is important to bear in mind that I will not use the terms western esotericism and occultism in the popular sense, with all their vague and emotional connotations but, rather, as technical terms for specific historical currents and phenomena. Western esotericism is a well-defined complex of traditions within the context of Christianity (although with parallels in Judaism and Islam).¹¹ The secularization of western esotericism produced a new phenomenon, referred to here as occultism. This is not to deny that (strange though it may sound to some readers) there is such a thing as Christian occultism, which attempts to preserve the essence of the religious context from which it has emerged.¹² In the majority of cases, however, the secularization of western esotericism resulted in a post-Christian occultism.

2. *Religion, religions, and spiritualities*

I suggested above that *The Celestine Prophecy* should be on the reading list of anybody who wishes to understand what is happening to religion in contemporary western societies. In order to expand on this

¹¹ Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7: 2 (1995), 121-124.

¹² See Jean-Pierre Laurant, *L'ésotérisme chrétien en France au XIXe siècle* (Politica Hermetica), Lausanne 1992.

statement, I will have to explain how I understand the term “religion”. I propose the following definition:

Religion = any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning.¹³

Let me break up this definition into its component parts. By referring to religion as a symbolic system, I mean that it is a system of “carriers of meaning” in the broadest sense of the word. For example, a Christian who attends church on Sundays enters a domain which is full of objects, words, images, sounds, actions, etc., all of which together form a whole which is meaningful to him. The tradition in which he has been brought up enables him to interpret this ensemble as well as its various components, and to understand their meaning. In his daily life during the rest of the week, symbols of religion may also be encountered to various extents, for example in certain books or papers he may read, images he may have on his walls, a political party for which he votes, a club or society in which he participates, and so on. And outside the private sphere, as well, he may encounter symbols which he immediately recognizes as “his own” (as well as those of “others,” which he may or may not immediately recognize as religious). Even if the role of religious symbols in his life remains largely confined to Sundays, they have an indisputable influence on his pattern of action. They make it possible for him to remain in contact — in church or elsewhere — with a framework of meaning which goes beyond the evidence of his sensory experience. And how is this contact maintained?

¹³ This is a critical reformulation of the famous definition proposed by Clifford Geertz in 1966 (“Religion as a Cultural System,” in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (ASA Monographs 3), repr. London 1985). For a detailed discussion see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Defining Religion in Spite of History,” in: Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk (eds.), *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, Leiden/Boston/Köln: Royal E.J. Brill 1999, 337-378.

Primarily by *doing* certain things with at least a minimum of consistency,¹⁴ and refraining from doing others.

New Age, then, is a form of religion as well. It is another symbolic system, in terms of which another ensemble of objects, words, images, sounds, actions, etc., carry another complex of meanings. But it still fulfills the same function — it influences the actions of New Agers because it enables them, in the things they do and the things they refrain from doing, to maintain contact between their everyday lives and a larger, more general framework of meaning.

While the above is a definition of religion, it is not a definition of *a* religion. I speak of a religion whenever the symbolic system in question takes the form of a social institution. Accordingly, the Dutch Reformed Church is religion as well as a religion. The same cannot be said about the New Age movement — we may speak of New Age religion, but not of New Age as *a* religion. Evidently this is not to deny that a group of New Agers may decide to come together in some kind of institutional form, either of a rudimentary or a more developed kind. The result is then “a New Age religion” (although perhaps a very small one): the equivalent of what is often referred to as a New Age “cult”.

“Religion,” therefore, may take the form of “a religion,” but need not do so. Alternatively, religion may take another form as well, which I propose to refer to as “a spirituality”:

A spirituality = any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems.¹⁵

¹⁴ Note that my use of the term “ritual” refers to “ritual action” in a general sense rather than implying a definition of “ritual”. It is possible to imagine a religious ritual which is enacted only once. Ritual action, however, whether in religious or non-religious contexts, is characterized by at least a minimal element of repetition.

¹⁵ My use of the term “manipulation” might create misunderstanding. I do not intend to make a statement about the extent to which individuals are capable of dissociating or distancing themselves from the various symbolic systems present in a given cultural and social context. I defend neither an extreme view of the “autonomous subject” which is supposedly at full liberty to make choices among the various

This is again a variation on my definition of “religion,” but it is evidently very different from a religion. In order to explain my concept of “a spirituality,” I would like to discuss two cases. The first one is an example of “a Christian spirituality,” the second is an example of “a New Age spirituality”.

During the first half of the 17th century, in the small town of Görlitz (now on the German-Polish border) lived a cobbler named Jacob Boehme.¹⁶ Having been tormented for years by questions about the origin of evil and suffering in the world, he finally experienced an interior illumination which changed his life. He describes how God permitted him a momentary glance into the innermost “center of nature,” thus enabling him to perceive all earthly things in the light of the divine mystery: the mystery of Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, divine Love and divine Wrath, and the reconciliation of these opposites by Christ. Boehme would devote the rest of his life to a continuing attempt to explain his interior experience in human language, and develop the implications of his vision. His writings are the work of a visionary genius and were to become the foundation of a rich spiritual tradition.¹⁷

symbolic systems which are available in the “religious supermarket” of contemporary western society, nor a (no less extreme) view according to which this so-called subject is merely a passive exponent of supra-personal “collective forces”. Symbolic systems are products of human beings who are in turn products of symbolic systems. The power of existing social structures is no less crucial than the capacity of individuals to make individual choices. In this context, the term “manipulation” merely means the empirical fact that people come up with personal and creative interpretations of existing symbolic systems. The question of where precisely the limits of their freedom of interpretation lie can be disregarded here.

¹⁶ On Boehme, see Alexandre Koyré, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme*, Paris 1971; Pierre Dehayé, *La naissance de Dieu, ou la doctrine de Jacob Boehme*, Paris 1985; Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*, Albany 1991.

¹⁷ See for example Pierre Dehayé, “Jacob Boehme and his Followers,” in Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York 1992, 210–247; Antoine Faivre, “Le courant théosophique (fin XVIe-XXe siècle): Essai de périodisation,” in: Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental II*, Paris 1996, 45-167;

Boehmian theosophy is a characteristic manifestation of the complex of traditions referred to under the general label of “western esotericism” (*supra*). It is evident that this perspective belongs to the domain of “religion” as I define it. Moreover (in spite of his problems with a local minister who considered him a heretic), Boehme’s esoteric teachings are undoubtedly rooted in a religion: Christianity as such, and the Lutheranism of his time in particular. But in addition to this, we are evidently also dealing here with “a spirituality”. Boehme’s work is the product of an “individual manipulation” of the various symbolic systems he had at his disposal: Christian symbolism in general, the more recent symbolism of Lutheranism in particular, as well as mystical traditions connected with the writings of Eckhart and Tauler, the nature-philosophical and esoteric symbolism of alchemy, and the teachings of Paracelsus. Using elements of these various symbolic systems, he created a new synthesis — a new way of understanding his native Christian faith. It is not necessary here to enter into the historical backgrounds of the traditions just mentioned; what concerns me here is Jacob Boehme’s work as an example of *a spirituality rooted in the symbolic system of a religion*.

Let me now compare this first case of a spirituality with a second, characteristic of New Age religion. I have intentionally chosen an example which displays certain similarities with Boehme, in order to make the differences stand out all the more clearly. On 9 September 1963, the New York science fiction writer Jane Roberts was suddenly and unexpectedly “hit” by a powerful psychic experience. She was quietly sitting at the table when, as she describes, ‘[b]etween one normal minute and the next, a fantastic avalanche of radical new ideas burst into my head with tremendous force, as if my skull were some sort of receiving station, turned up to unbearable volume’.¹⁸

Arthur Versluis, “Christian Theosophic Literature of the 17th and 18th Centuries,” in Van den Broek and Hanegraaff, *Gnosis and Hermeticism*; B.J. Gibbons, *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and its Development in England*, Cambridge 1996.

¹⁸ Jane Roberts, *The Seth Material*, Toronto 1970, 11-12. Cf. my discussions in *New Age Religion*, 28-29, 37 and *passim*. For further background information on Roberts,

The experience involved not only ideas, but was also accompanied by extreme and unusual physical sensations and by a sort of psychedelic experience of travelling through many dimensions. When she regained her composure, she found herself furiously scribbling down the words and ideas that had flashed through her head. In an attempt to find out what had happened to her, she and her husband started experimenting with spiritistic techniques. Some time later they contacted a spirit, who eventually began to communicate directly through Jane Roberts' body. In this way, she developed into a so-called trance medium or "channel" for a "higher entity," who referred to himself as Seth. Seth's messages were published and have exerted an enormous (and still underestimated) influence on the development of the New Age movement. The core of his teaching is that we all "create our own reality," in a process of spiritual evolution through countless existences on this planet as well as in an infinity of other dimensions. Few New Agers realize how many of the beliefs which they take for granted in their daily lives have their historical origin in Seth's messages.

The intriguing phenomenon of channeling is not my subject here.¹⁹ I would merely like to emphasize how strongly Seth's messages appear to fit within Jane Roberts' personal frame of reference. As may be checked by a comparison with the books she published under her own name,²⁰ this frame of reference consisted of a highly eclectic combination of religious and non-religious symbolic systems. They included the Romantic cosmology and evolutionism of the American Transcendentalists, the "positive thinking" of the New Thought movement and related traditions usually referred to as the American "Metaphysical Movements," spiritualism and parapsychology in the wake of magnetism and American mesmerism, but also science fiction literature,

see Arthur Hastings, *With the Tongues of Men and Angels: A Study of Channeling*, Fort Worth 1991.

¹⁹ For an excellent recent study, see Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age*, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1997.

²⁰ See, for example, Jane Roberts, *The God of Jane: A Psychic Manifesto*, New York 1981.

popular science, and popular psychology. From the elements of all these symbolic systems, Jane Roberts — or Seth — created a new, original synthesis.

The Seth teachings evidently qualify as “religion” in terms of my definition. But they evidently do not constitute *a* religion, nor are they rooted in a religion, as was the case with Boehme. They are clearly an example of a spirituality, however: they are the product of individual manipulation of existing symbolic systems (religious as well as non-religious). This spirituality fulfilled the function which it still fulfills in the context of the New Age movement today: it influences human action by providing the possibility for maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general “meta-empirical” framework of meaning. It is therefore undoubtedly religion.

I should add one important note. In both the examples just given, we are dealing with the spectacular products of unquestionably gifted individuals, whose published writings made such an impression on readers that their spirituality (or elements of it) was adopted by others and took on a life of its own. But when talking of “spiritualities” we should definitely not think merely or even mainly of the comparatively rare phenomenon of “religious virtuosi”. In principle we are dealing with a common everyday phenomenon: every person who gives an individual twist to existing religious symbols (be it only in a minimal sense) is already engaged in the practice of creating his or her own spirituality. In this sense, each existing religion *generates* multiple spiritualities as a matter of course, and it is only the more spectacular cases which sometimes become the basis for a new spiritual tradition.

“Spiritualities” and “religions” might be roughly characterized as the individual and institutional poles within the general domain of “religion”. A religion without spiritualities is impossible to imagine. But, as will be seen, the reverse — a spirituality without a religion — is quite possible in principle. Spiritualities can emerge on the basis of an existing religion, but they can very well do without. New Age is the example *par excellence* of this latter possibility: a complex of spiritualities which emerges on the foundation of a pluralistic secular society.

3. *Secularization*

Above, I have repeatedly used terms such as “secular” and “secularization,” and it is important to define precisely what I mean and do not mean by them. Not very long ago, it was widely assumed that religion’s days were numbered. As science and rationality took the place of faith, religion would become obsolete; it would largely or completely die out, or at the very least lose its social significance. While such ideas may still be encountered from time to time, it has become increasingly clear that they are the product of wishful thinking on the part of convinced secularists. The weight of evidence demonstrates quite clearly that, regardless of how one defines “religion,” it remains fully alive and shows no signs of vanishing. If “secularization” is taken to mean the decline and disappearance of religion, it is clearly a myth. The secularization thesis may be reformulated, however, in a way which is perfectly in accord with the facts: under the impact of a series of pervasive historical and social processes since the 18th century, religion is in the process of *changing* its face in a quite radical fashion. It is not vanishing, but is being transformed under the impact of new circumstances.

It might be argued that this is hardly anything new. No religion has ever been static. There has always been change and transformation, and secularization might therefore be regarded as merely another stage in the history of religion in western societies. However, I will suggest that the transformation of religion under the impact of secularization is more than that. I believe it to be a historically unique and unprecedented process, representing a more profound historical caesura than any other transformation known to us from history. I will not discuss here the highly complex combination of *causes* of this phenomenon, which has been underway most clearly since the 18th century; there is an abundant historical and sociological literature on the subject. For my present purpose, it suffices to define the process of secularization as

the whole of historical developments in western society, as a result of which the Christian religion has lost its central position as the foundational collective symbolism of western culture, and has been reduced to merely one among several

religious institutions within a culture which is no longer grounded in a religious system of symbols.

In passing, I note that this process has obviously affected non-western societies as well; but the complications of that process may be disregarded here. What I am concerned with is defining as clearly as possible in which respects contemporary western society is different from all other societies prior to the Enlightenment. It seems to me that the answer is clear: as far as we know, there has never been a human society whose general and collectively shared culture was not religious. In other words, there has never before been a society whose collective symbolism was not of such a kind as to provide possibilities for people to maintain contact with a larger, more general meta-empirical framework of meaning. Precisely such a non-religious complex of symbolic systems, however, is characteristic of contemporary society.²¹

What does this mean in the context of my distinction between religions and spiritualities? Secularization does not mean that religion is vanishing or that religions are dying out; but it does mean that religion as such is radically changing its face. The essence of this process, I suggest, lies in the fact that religion is becoming less and less the domain of religions, and more and more the domain of spiritualities.

Obviously, to state that religion is increasingly individualized is nothing new. Several decades ago, Peter Berger explained how religion in contemporary western society has become a matter of a conscious choice instead of being a natural dimension of daily experience.²² This is the case even in a country such as the United States of America, whose inhabitants (other than those of the Netherlands) claim in

²¹ Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "La fin de l'ésotérisme? Le mouvement du Nouvel Age et la question du symbolisme religieux," "La fin de l'ésotérisme? Le mouvement du nouvel âge et la question du symbolisme religieux," in: *Symboles et mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques (17ème-20ème siècle)*, Paris: Archè Edidit/La Table d'Emeraude 1999, 128-147.

²² Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, London 1980.

overwhelming majority to believe in God. This “choosing for religion” may take various forms. One may choose to participate in an existing religion or, if one has been brought up in one, to continue participating. The religion in question may be a Christian church, but it might also be one of the numerous “new religious movements” or cults which are active in contemporary society. And, of course, any existing religion may spawn new spiritualities in turn, i.e. whenever individuals make new and creative use of existing symbolic systems. Essentially, this is how all religion (and not just New Age religion) functions in a pluralistic and secular society.

Nevertheless, in the context of the process of secularization the nature of New Age religion is a special and radical one. Before attempting to explain in what sense this is so, I will first summarize my argument up to this point. Before the period of the Enlightenment, rather than Christianity being a religion within the more general context of western culture, that culture as a whole was religious. This is why the “Christian spirituality” of an esotericist such as Jacob Boehme is naturally rooted in his religion. He gave his own, personal twist to a system of symbols for which he had never been forced to make a conscious choice, but which, from the outset, provided the context of his very thoughts and experiences. As a result of complex secularization processes, western society is now no longer based upon a religious system of symbols but on a non-religious one (or, rather, several of them). Within that context, *all* religion — whether as “religions” or as “spiritualities” — has become a matter of individual choice. Likewise, Christianity is no longer what it was during most of its history. From providing a general context within which it was possible for people to make individual creative choices, Christianity has itself become merely one possible option among many.

The crucial characteristic of New Age religion, I suggest, is that it consists of a complex of spiritualities which are no longer embedded in any religion — as was the case with all spiritualities from the past — but directly in secular culture itself. All manifestations of New Age religion, without exception, are based upon what I have called an “individual manipulation of existing symbolic systems”. In this

way, new syntheses are continually being created, providing the very thing which religion has always provided: the possibility for ritually maintaining contact with a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning, in terms of which people give sense to their experiences in daily life.

Spiritualities in a traditional religious context did not need to start from scratch. The religion in which they were embedded *already* served to provide meaning. The primary function of new spiritualities was to clarify and flesh out existing religious symbolism, so as to “fine tune” it to the specific needs of the person in question. Hence, Jacob Boehme certainly did not develop his esoteric system because he doubted that Christ had saved humanity from sin — he did it in order to better understand what that meant.

New Age spiritualities, in contrast, are not rooted in any existing religion. They are based upon the individual manipulation of religious *as well as* non-religious symbolic systems, and this manipulation is undertaken in order to fill these symbols with new religious meaning. As far as existing religious symbolic systems are concerned, New Age spiritualities generally concentrate on whatever is *not* associated too closely with the traditional churches and their theologies. Hence their preference for alternative traditions, from gnosticism and western esotericism in their own culture to various religious traditions from other cultures. As far as their use of non-religious symbolic systems is concerned, by far the most important area is that of popular “mythologies of science”.²³ In countless ways, New Agers give a spiritual twist to the symbolism of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity,²⁴ various psychological schools,²⁵ sociological theories,²⁶ and so on. The common basis of New Age religion is, therefore, no longer the symbolic system of an existing religion but a large number of symbolic systems of various provenance, bits and pieces of which are constantly

²³ Cf. Hanegraaff, “La fin de l’ésotérisme”.

²⁴ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, chs. 3 & 6 (esp. 128-151).

²⁵ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, chs. 2, 8 & 15 (esp. 482-513).

²⁶ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, ch. 5.

being recycled by the popular media. Since there is no longer a commonly shared source of authority which indicates how all this information fits together within a religious framework, everybody is left to his or her own devices for figuring out the religious implications of available symbolic systems. At most, they may find assistance in the products of a continuous stream of popular literature which, however, does not follow one clear direction either.

As such, New Age is the manifestation *par excellence* of the secularization of religion: religion becomes solely a matter of individual choice and detaches itself from religious institutions, that is, from exclusive commitment to specific “religions”. In addition, what is considered to be *real* religion according to a New Age perspective is hardly compatible (if at all) with religious institutions. Here, as in many other things, New Age religion reveals itself as a typical product of the Enlightenment tradition. A consistent refrain in New Age sources is that man has finally managed to free himself from the tyranny of religious power structures; “religions” are perceived as being based upon blind acceptance of dogmas, which have long prevented the faithful from discovering the divinity that resides within themselves.

In this context, one is reminded of a passage written by Émile Durkheim early in the present century. Durkheim defined religion as a social institution; in other words, he made no distinction between religion and religions. He believed that in this way he could accommodate all the *existing* forms of religion, but he also realized that new forms of religion were in the process of emerging which were no longer embodied in social institutions and for which, therefore, his own theory of religion would no longer be sufficient.²⁷ His words sound like a veritable prophecy of the New Age movement. Durkheim speaks of “individual religions that the individual institutes for himself and celebrates for himself alone,” and he foresees a time when “the only cult will be the one that each person freely practices in his innermost self”. Such a new form of religion, he predicts, “would consist entirely of

²⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie* (1912), repr. Paris 1960, 63-65.

interior and subjective states and be freely construed by each one of us”.²⁸

4. *New Age: Secular Religion*

This new form of religion has indeed arrived. Durkheim foresaw it already at the beginning of the 20th century, and it is time for the historical and social significance of the phenomenon to be recognized more widely. In academic circles and elsewhere, one may still perceive a tendency to dismiss New Age religion as a mere temporary fashion which will no doubt vanish of its own accord. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain such an attitude when the “fashion” shows no signs of disappearing. But more importantly, it betrays a certain blindness to what is happening *structurally* to religion in contemporary society. If New Age is a passing fad, then where are New Agers expected to turn once the fashion is over? Will they, at long last, embrace the consistently non-religious worldview (with or without a “God-is-dead” theology) which intellectuals have been predicting for so long? This expectation merely reflects yet another superseded ideology of secular progress: to the best of my knowledge, nothing indicates (or has ever indicated) that normal, ordinary people are particularly eager for a worldview which will prevent them from perceiving a deeper meaning in their everyday lives. Or will New Agers return to the fold of the traditional churches and a communal faith? This would require a true *deus ex machina*, since existing social realities and the internal logic of development both point towards an individualistic turning away from traditional religious institutions against the background of a continuing demand for religious meaning. What is more, such turning away is not necessarily inconsistent with continued church participation; as I will argue, it may also take the form of an *innere Emigration* within the churches themselves.

Certainly, many observers (the present author not excluded) would have preferred a consistently secular type of religion to have turned

²⁸ Translation according to É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Karen E. Fields, transl., New York 1995.

out to be a bit more profound than *The Celestine Prophecy* or the spirituality of Shirley MacLaine. But given the course of developments since the period of the Enlightenment, precisely this type of pop religion is what could have been expected all along. Combining my argument so far with the analysis of New Age ideas which I have provided elsewhere (and only summarized here), I come to the following conclusion.

New Age is, first of all, a clear and consistent manifestation of secular religion. It provides the possibility for people to construe a spirituality according to their own individual preferences, within the context of a culturally pluralistic society. I have argued that we are not dealing merely with a general emphasis on individualization, but with a unique and unprecedented phenomenon: for the very first time in history, spiritualities are detaching themselves entirely from specific existing religions and are starting to lead their own lives within the context of a non-religious society.

Secondly, it is only to be expected that such a type of individualized religion should place the emphasis on personal inner experience. It is, therefore, not just by chance that New Age takes its inspiration from western esoteric traditions with their emphasis on gnosis, especially in their modern occultist form. On the one hand, we may observe a turning away from everything associated with traditional dogmatic theology and church institutions. This tendency is undeniable not only in view of the decline in church attendance, but may also (and perhaps even more clearly) be observed among those who nevertheless wish to remain part of a church. On the other hand, the search for meaning based upon intuition, transcending the senses and the rational mind, reflects an equally strong pattern of criticism with respect to everything associated with a purely rationalist scientific worldview (including an over-rationalist theology). Since both the dominant pillars of western culture — for the sake of brevity, let me refer to them as “reason” and “faith” — are therefore being rejected, it is natural for New Agers to search for alternatives in a “universal gnosis,” believed to have

been marginalized by the culturally dominant institutions.²⁹ Western esoteric traditions do indeed tend to emphasize personal experience as the foundation of true religion. If these esoteric traditions are perceived through an “occultist” mirror (i.e. reflecting the characteristic 19th-century idea of gnosis as a higher synthesis of religion and science) they may suddenly seem tailor-made for the needs of contemporary people.

5. A case study: “*Nieuwe tijdsdenken*” and New Age

My last formulation contains an intentional edge of reservation. As noted above, popular New Age perceptions of western esoteric traditions are usually far removed from what these traditions represented in historical reality. Let us take a look at one specific example.

In recent years, an interesting current has developed within the Dutch mainstream churches, consisting of people who feel connected to the Christian tradition but who emphasize the need for a dialogue with New Age. Representatives refer to their perspective as *nieuwe tijdsdenken* (i.e., the literal Dutch translation of “new age thinking,” as opposed to the English term which is standardly used as an Anglicism in the Dutch language), and usually claim that this is something very different from New Age. However, I see little reason for viewing *nieuwe tijdsdenken* as other than a convenient term for indicating how New Age thinking manifests itself in the specific context of the Christian churches. Given this context, *nieuwe tijdsdenkers* place an understandable emphasis on recovering forgotten “spiritual alternatives” in the history of Christianity. The successful Dutch author Jacob Slavenburg, for example, writes book after book devoted to the battle against gnosticism in the early centuries, the suppression of the Cathars in the Middle Ages, and about some later esoteric currents in the history of

²⁹ For a theoretical discussion of the problematics of this three-part typology, cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “A Dynamic Typological Approach to the Problem of ‘Post-Gnostic’ Gnosticism,” *ARIES* 16 (1992), 5-43.

Christianity.³⁰ The pervasive theme of such literature is the implacable opposition between the peaceful faith of true “spiritual Christians” on the one hand, and the violent intolerance of church institutions and dogmatic theologians on the other. The message is that Christians must find their way back to the essence of the Christian message, which is to be found not in religious institutions and dogmatic beliefs but in the intuitive “knowledge of the heart”.

The picture presented by *nieuwe tijdsdenkers* does contain a kernel of truth. It is well-known that gnostics, mystics and esotericists have often found themselves in conflict with the representatives of socially dominant forms of Christianity, and have usually been the losing party in these confrontations. Since the history of these internal Christian conflicts is not a pretty one, it is quite natural to be sympathetic towards the victims of religious intolerance. In addition, there is certainly reason to take a more serious look at their views than has been done in the past. But that being said, we cannot but observe that the defenders of *nieuwe tijdsdenken* evince the same type of dualistic thinking which they criticize in their opponents. Traditional theological narratives describe the history of Christianity as practically synonymous with the history of the churches; the history of heresies tends to be presented in dualist fashion as a battle of light against darkness, the true gospel against the error of gnosis. The narrator’s party is idealized and its representatives tend to be presented in a halo of sanctity, whereas the losing party is demonized and hardly gets a chance to make its own voice heard. As an alternative to such one-sided narratives, *nieuwe tijdsdenkers* now present an equally dualistic one: the true “spiritual Christians” are consistently idealized in their heroic resistance against the error of religious power structures, rigid dogmas and ruthless theologians.

Of course, historiography for *nieuwe tijdsdenkers* is less a goal in itself than a means to an end. The underlying motivation is to stimulate a broad change of mentality within the churches under the banner

³⁰ See for example J. Slavenburg, *De verloren erfenis*, Utrecht 1993; and cf. my critical review “Slavenburg doet historische waarheid geweld aan,” *Trouw* 21.6.1993.

of a newly-discovered “gnosis”. Given these priorities, it is hardly surprising that representatives are not terribly interested in precise analyses in which the relationship between the Christian religion and Christian spiritualities is described with all the nuances required by such complex subject matter.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this relationship which needs to be explored. I suggest that in current discussions about *nieuwe tijdsdenken* (and, I suspect, in similar discussions taking place in other European countries than the Netherlands), all the parties involved overlook the fundamental difference between “spiritualities” which function within a traditional religious context on the one hand, and those which function within a secular context on the other. It seems to me to be of the utmost importance to recognize that a seemingly unproblematic term such as “Christian spirituality” (which is frequently invoked in these discussions) may mean two very different things which should not be confused: it may mean a spirituality rooted in the symbolic system of Christianity, but it may also mean a spirituality which makes use of Christian terminology to give shape to a form of secular religion. Precisely this is the gap between (to stick to my examples) the “Christian spirituality” of Jacob Boehme and the one defended by New Age admirers. This gap can emphatically not be bridged merely by stating that both attach such great importance to personal religious experience as a path to spiritual insight. Such a statement merely formulates the greatest common divider but does not say anything specific about the perspectives of either Christian spirituality or contemporary forms of Christian New Age spirituality. As soon as we take a closer look at the latter, the differences turn out to be at least as important as the similarities.

I am therefore quite sceptical about the ease with which *nieuwe tijdsdenkers* expect their perspective to be sufficient to lay the foundations of a revitalization of Christian spirituality. But neither am I very happy with the attitude of disinterest that seems to be typical of most academic theologians. The latter tend to persist in looking at New Age as a marginal phenomenon which may conveniently be ignored since it has no connection with “real” theology or “real” Christianity. I do not

intend to deny the kernel of truth in this; as an empirical historian of religions I cannot and do not (nor do I have any wish to) claim to know how to distinguish “true” from “false” theology or Christianity, but it is certainly true that there are profound and far-reaching differences between what each party understands by true and false Christianity. Psychologically (and politically) it may be understandable that academic theologians prefer to concentrate on what they regard as true Christianity and true theology; but if they choose to do so, they will eventually have to face up to the consequences. These consequences consist of an increasing alienation from what an important and growing section of ordinary believers understands by “Christianity”. The frequent outcome of such alienation is a sort of *innere Emigration*, which may easily be underestimated precisely because of its individual emphasis and inner-directedness. The academic theologian who visits a Sunday church service may be reassured by the impression that not too many things seem to have changed; but this impression is deceptive. If he could read the minds of the churchgoers, he would find that many of them are playing, although to various extents, with ideas for which his professional training has never prepared him: beliefs about reincarnation and karma, angels as spiritual messengers and helpers, paranormal assistance from the divine world, new channeled revelations such as those of the apostle Paul directed to the Dutch churches, newly-discovered gnostic gospels, Celestine prophecies, and a whole complex of ideas and assumptions intimately connected with them.

I will repeat my main thesis once again. It may be tempting to dismiss this type of religion as a mere fashion which will pass away of its own accord, or to ignore it because we cannot and do not want to take it seriously. But, in reality, what we are dealing with is the way in which secular religion manifests itself in the context of the Christian churches. This is a phenomenon too important to be passed over lightly.

6. Conclusion

The so-called “challenge of secularization” has long been taken seriously by academics concerned with religion in the modern world,

but many of them still tend to understand it primarily as concerning the opposition between Christianity and a non-religious view of life. This is an outdated perception of the problem. The emergence of New Age religion shows how secularization itself generates an entirely new type of religion, which may superficially resemble older traditions but is actually based upon brandnew foundations. This makes New Age religion into a crucial phenomenon, which students of contemporary religion will ignore at their peril.

Chair “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents” WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

University of Amsterdam,
Faculty of Humanities
Oude Turfmarkt 147
NL-1012 GC Amsterdam